

THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY SERIES

PREPARING TO FACE OUR NEXT ENEMY

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The *Centre of Gravity* series is the flagship publication of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) based at The Australian National University's College of Asia and the Pacific. The series aspires to provide high quality analysis and to generate debate on strategic policy issues of direct relevance to Australia. *Centre of Gravity* papers are 1,500-2,000 words in length and are written for a policy audience. Consistent with this, each *Centre of Gravity* paper includes at least one policy recommendation. Papers are commissioned by SDSC and appearance in the series is by invitation only. SDSC commissions up to 10 papers in any given year.

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A prodigious author and editor, O'Neill wrote the Official History of Australia's role in the Korean War, influential reports for the Ford Foundation on reducing levels of conflict in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as dozens of academic books and innumerable articles and essays. Professor O'Neill is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in Britain.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The ADF needs to be prepared for four main tasks: defence of Australian sovereign territory; assist larger international forces; counter-insurgency; and disaster relief.
- With rising demand for land, resources and food, Australia is at greater risk of threats from major powers.
- The ADF needs to continue developing the skills of operating effectively in the Middle East and South-west Asia.
- The ADF needs to study and work with the forces of our allies, especially in the matter of command and control for each of its tasks.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Australia has to use the post-Afghanistan period to create a foundation on which we can base our security over the decades ahead. The ADF needs to focus on raising the costs of major power aggression, while sustaining counter insurgency, coalition and disaster relief skills. Significantly higher spending will be required to ensure national security, though building the public case is a task for Government leaders not the Defence Department or the ADF.

As the Australian Defence Force (ADF) prepares to leave combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014, a question arises as to who our next enemy might be. For what contingencies should the ADF train? How should our forces be organized, equipped, commanded and deployed in the interval between 2014 and the next possible assignment? Shall we prove to be very good at preparing to fight our latest war, which will probably never repeat itself, or might we be able to take a well-founded look into the future and prepare the ADF for the challenges it will actually have to face?

Major Tasks

Looking ahead I can see four major types of task for the ADF: defence of our sovereign territory; contribution of contingents to larger international forces, both regionally and globally; counter-insurgency operations; and disaster relief. This is not to say that I agree that all of these types of task should be undertaken, but it is only realistic to accept that they probably will be required of the ADF should future Australian governments be anything like their predecessors. Let me turn to each of these four tasks in turn and consider ways in which they might arise, the nature of probable enemy use of force against us, the skills and capacities required by the ADF, and the organization and support it will need to succeed in carrying out each of these missions.

Defence of Sovereign Territory

The first and most basic requirement for the ADF is to be able to defend Australian sovereign territory. Only once, in 1942, has our sovereignty been under severe threat. The nature of world politics is changing however, and international society in the 21st century could prove to be dangerous for a large, well-endowed but sparsely populated country like Australia. Population pressures, environmental degradation, climate change and bad government are likely to cause international conflicts in ways that have not arisen often in kinder eras, when populations were not so dense and the world's food production capacity was not under threat from other activities such as mining and chemical spills. Demand for minerals and energy will rise and place more pressure on international relations, and the major powers may well seek to strengthen their own bases for competition with others by, in effect, taking over and exploiting medium and smaller powers. Australia could face threats rather like those which confronted weaker states of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The recently published Australian Defence White Paper does not analyze this type of threat to our security nor its implications for our defence strategy, force structure and national infrastructure. The White Paper focuses its discussion on multilateral threats, which fit well with the security context of the past sixty years, but which may not be as dominant over the coming sixty years as unilateral dangers. If large countries with huge populations experience diminishing availability of food, energy and other vital resources, their natural inclination might be to look around for another large country which has much smaller population pressures on its available food supply and resources, and decide simply to march in and take it all over. Who would spring to our defence in that situation? The answer is not as clear and certain as in the case of action that directly threatens other state interests in our region, especially if the “other state” includes the United States (US). Thus Australia has a relatively new kind of defence problem to live with, which can challenge our capacities severely.

As experts in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) said in the 1970s, we cannot prevent threats to our sovereignty from arising but we can make it so difficult for would-be aggressor powers to have their way that they will be deterred from striking against us. This means that we must maximize the difficulties of crossing the sea and air gap surrounding Australia, as well as being able effectively to contest attempts at lodgment on land, especially in areas close to potential enemies in northern and western Australia.

Therefore the ADF needs a strong maritime defence component (navy and air force) as well as highly survivable forces on land. These forces need to train to meet advanced enemies who intend to make limited scale attacks on us. Our aim is to deter attack rather than always to be able to defeat an attack using maximum force. At that level it becomes a challenge for our major ally. We need naval, air and land bases to support defence operations in our most vulnerable and vital regions. But even these modest goals will require Australia to build and maintain substantial air and naval forces. These forces will be expensive to procure and maintain, and complex to operate. Recent levels of defence expenditure will not suffice for our national security in the future. Also the basing and support infrastructure requirements for the defence of our most vulnerable areas are substantial, and these will create further demands for increased defence expenditure. We could also benefit from partnership arrangements with allies and other friendly powers in terms of training, major exercises and equipment procurement.

Contribution to international forces, regionally and globally

Experience has shown that the most frequent demands on the ADF are likely to come from allies and other friendly powers who need help – especially of a political nature. The United States does not need Australian participation in order to turn around its prospects for victory in the field, but we can make a difference (which is appreciated) by showing that we approve of the cause for which US forces are committed, and can at least make a modest contribution to their success.

While I appreciate that many Australians would prefer the Government to minimize such commitments, none the less we have to be able to meet this sort of demand occasionally. In the case of Korea, Australia and all other members of the UN Command alliance there, are obliged by the Joint Policy Declaration of 27 July 1953 to return to the battlefield should North Korea renew its attack on the South. Indeed, Kim Jong-un has said he will do just that, and that the Armistice Agreement is null and void in his view. Perhaps the Joint Policy Declaration no longer has much force or binding power, but this outcome cannot be assumed. Australia needs to be able to operate credibly and effectively with the US and other partners, especially South Korea, if its international friendships are to yield positive results.

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More controversially, the ADF needs to continue developing the skills of operating effectively in the Middle East and South-west Asia against a wide variety of possible enemies, ranging from major national conventional forces, such as those of Iraq and Iran, to subnational insurgents such as Al Qaeda and other Jihadis. While some of Australia’s terrain and climate closely resembles those of the Middle East, the complicating human dimension is missing from the local scene. Units of the ADF will need to refresh their Middle Eastern experience if they are to remain capable of operating there.

One special category of international operation that may present itself is assistance to maintain the credibility of the United Nations (UN), or to restore its authority. While the UN faces many critics today, especially in the United States, it was, after all an American creation, and the world would be much the worse off were it to lose its authority and capabilities to help smaller powers and underdogs around the world. Discharging this responsibility could require the ADF to be able to operate over much of Africa, the Middle East, South and Central America, and the smaller island states of the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic oceans, in company with a wide range of other national partners. The types of operation required are likely to cover a wide part of the spectrum ranging from conventional to counter-insurgency operations, on land, at sea and in the air.

Let me now look at possible counter-insurgency tasks for the ADF.

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Counter-insurgency locally and regionally

Counter-insurgency operations in themselves cover a wide spectrum, ranging from aspects of the Australian assistance program for the Solomon Islands Government over the past decade to the much higher profile operations of the counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan. Australia has been involved in counter-insurgency operations for a long time, beginning with the Malayan Emergency. We have learned much over the past sixty years and have won international praise for our skill and effectiveness in this field. The best way to learn counter-insurgency techniques is to practise them, and this will also be a special requirement for the training of the ADF, both in Australia and abroad. Because it is a wide and potentially controversial field, it would help if the ADF's counter-insurgency specialists could train and operate with others who are skilful at this business.

Given the high level of disorder that has existed in the Middle East over the past two decades, it is not difficult to imagine that there will be calls for Australian participation in counter-insurgency operations in that region. While the ADF should have the capacities to engage in such operations successfully, the Australian Government will have to be careful not to commit the Force to conflicts which are either inherently unwinnable, or liable to escalate into major regional wars beyond the level that United States public opinion will support.

The nature of counter-insurgency techniques will change as societies change. Like conventional military operations, new strategies and tactics are constantly evolving and training programs must take this factor into account. Some of this training can take place within Australia but it will also be important for counter-insurgency forces to hone their skills in the island states of the South Pacific, as well as in more distant regions which are being threatened by more powerful insurgencies, especially in the Middle East, South-west Asia and Africa. Training outside Australia should allow for co-operation with potential allies and less formal partners, and it needs to be done at a high level of proficiency, or the ADF's carefully built reputation might be damaged. It will be important that ADF personnel train and work with our allies, so that allied weaknesses and inherent differences in our approaches to insurgency problems are recognised and dealt with before we have to commence a new round of operations with other friendly forces.

New training programs must embrace the increasing role of social network media in connecting potential dissidents, i.e. politically and socially active young people, thereby possibly playing to a strong side of our own response capacity. But we must not take this for granted. Dissidents and insurgents can easily develop their skills in different ways and directions to ours.

Disaster relief

A fourth category of operational tasks for the ADF in the years ahead will be disaster relief. As populations grow, and climate change becomes more of a factor in determining whether our living environment is benign or dangerous, the ADF will, inevitably, have to assist with rescue and sustenance operations, in Australia and the

South-west Pacific, South-east Asian, Indian Ocean and African regions. It may also have to develop, take charge of and implement major works programs to rectify the effects of harsh climate and geophysical change such as urban damage, floods, storms, bush-fires, volcanoes and tsunamis. Famine relief, reinforcement of public health programs and the containment and treatment of diseases are also likely tasks for the ADF in years ahead.

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These factors, reinforced by persecution and the poor quality of governments in many countries, are likely to lead to significant movements of people seeking refuge for their families and better prospects for themselves. While we may have great sympathy for those involved directly in this flow of humanity across the seas to Australia, it has none the less to be controlled. The ADF has to play a major part in the controlling mechanism. This role will become more difficult and delicate politically as refugees learn more about the techniques of gaining a foothold in the desired refuge country, and build more support in the international community. Hence the training and deployment requirements of this task are likely to grow over the decades ahead.

Command and Control Arrangements for these Tasks

All of these tasks are complex, and the delivery of their hoped-for beneficial impact will depend heavily on the knowledge, skills and quality of Australian armed service leadership. This leadership, in turn, can only function properly within the context of a national or allied command structure, suitably located, protected and provided with high capacity, secure communications and information handling technology. We need to do much more work on developing this national command structure, and training the men and women who are to command and staff it. We also need to study and work with the forces of our allies, especially in the matter of command and control for each of these four varieties of task.

We must also be able to field contingents made up of multiple armed services under Australian command if we are to retain a degree of national identity and control. For some missions, particularly disaster relief, the ADF will need to be able to work with appropriate civil agencies. In some cases it may have to co-operate with privately owned businesses and companies.

Training Requirements

The training challenges facing the ADF in developing useful response capacities for each of these four types of task are formidable, particularly if we wish to stand on our own feet and not see ourselves simply as an incremental addition to the power of larger allies. A considerable amount of the training required for the ADF can be done in Australia, thanks to its large surface area, diversities in climate and vegetation, and the length of its coastline. Also, once a certain level of proficiency has been achieved, much of the further training required can be done in a study, a classroom or through modestly sized field exercises. The effectiveness of training at this more modest numerical level will depend greatly on the knowledge and intellectual qualities of those in command and their directing staff, but other armed forces have shown us how to develop successful tactics and strategies without their full complement of troops.

We need to encourage and support the development of discussion groups (or brains trusts) of bright servicemen and women to keep developing new operational ideas, particularly in response to the impact of new technology which might be used against them.

Diverse exercise areas will be necessary for ADF training across Australia, and they must be supplemented by international (particularly regional) experience. Australian diplomats will have to win regional co-operation in the training of defence forces including the ADF. If this mission is carried through successfully, there should be adequate training facilities and opportunities available across the South-east Asian and South-west Pacific regions. But to realize this vision, Australia will need to convince its neighbours that it stands ready to assist them in maintaining their own security, without any attempt at or appearance of undercutting their sovereignty and independence.

Other Preparations for the Challenges

This focus on preparations of the armed forces must not ignore the political and social context in which future military operations will have to be conducted. Political leaders will need to develop their own expertise in commanding and administering the kinds of operations discussed above. Few politicians these days have personal experience of military operations, and those lacking in this dimension would be well advised to spend time with the ADF on exercises within Australia and internationally. They will need especially to be able to make their own assessments of the adequacy of our military leaders so that when replacements seem justified by poor results, our political leaders can select military successors wisely and confidently.

Government leaders need to be able to build and retain the support of the Australian people for whatever operations the ADF is committed to. This requirement calls for a dialogue in which other types of opinion leaders outside the major political parties will be involved. The roles of the research institutes and universities will be important in this regard. They will need to be drawn into the dialogue and listened to. The media also have a prominent part to play, and the government needs to help media specialists to do their job expertly, and not expect them simply to form a chorus of approval.

And there are many more specialised contributions to be made by people and agencies outside of the ADF which can assist the military's performance in operations, such as intelligence, communications, logistical support and industrial capacity. Space does not permit me to develop thoughts on these aspects of the ADF's future training and work, but they are complex and vital to our future security.

Finally there are the financial provisions that have to be made to pay for our security. Anyone who has studied Cabinet papers in the period since the Second World War knows what a powerful constraint finance has been on the long-term development of the ADF in times of peace. If we are going to have any serious capacities for being other than an appendage to the forces of the United States and other great powers, we are going to have to spend considerably more than we have been doing over the last two decades. Building the case for higher defence expenditure is a task for Government leaders, not the Defence Department or the ADF. The recent Defence White Paper is in many ways a very sensible document, but its objectives will not be reached without a more sustained national commitment to supporting the people, equipment and real-estate that the Force needs.

In Conclusion

The challenges ahead of the ADF in maintaining Australia's security and supporting international order will be diverse and formidable. As an independent nation, largely responsible for maintaining its own security, Australia has to accept these challenges and use the post-Afghanistan period to create a foundation on which we can base our security over the decades ahead. While the challenges will be testing, potential enemies will not face easy choices if we prepare ourselves well. Numbers of service personnel, the capability of their equipment and the strength of its financial support will all be important. But as history has shown, nothing is more important than good ideas and well-trained leaders to put them into effect.

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